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Censorship is the real threat

DES MOINES, Iowa — William Casey said the nation would be threatened if The Washington Post printed its story about accused spy Ronald W. Pelton.

The Post printed the story. And the nation now is threatened.

It's threatened not because of anything the Post said about how our submarines listen in on the Soviets. Rather, it's threatened because a big, powerful newspaper has been censored by the government. And make no mistake about it, that is what has happened.

Casey, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, warned Benjamin Bradlee, the executive editor of the Post, that the CIA would seek to prosecute the Post if it published the information it had about Pelton. Then Casey's boss, President Reagan, tele-

phoned Bradlee's boss, Katharine Graham, and urged her not to publish the article. National security would be endangered, they said.

So the Post gave in and published Wednesday a censored article that was 5 feet 9 inches long and that was as bland as it was lengthy. The article quoted Bradlee as saying he continued to believe that the newspaper's original version would have revealed nothing that was not already known to the Soviet Union.

Then why didn't the Post print that version? Here's how the article explained:

"But, Bradlee added, because the Post has been unable fully to judge the validity of the national security objections of senior officials, and because of Post lawyers' concerns, the paper has decided to print this article without a description of

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the technology Pelton allegedly betrayed."

The operative words there are "because of Post lawyers' concerns." That's a euphemism for censorship.

"Whenever something is not published because 'the lawyers say,' you have a real danger," says Robert Sack, a partner in the law firm of Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher and an authority on First Amendment law.

"You're saying, 'I'm not publishing because the government told me not to.'"

That, scary and chilling, seems to be what happened Wednesday. And that is how the Pelton case has really threatened our democracy.